

## **Individual Paper**

### **Research Domain: Student Experiences**

**Title: A Foucauldian discourse analysis into the role of student voice in a UK higher education institute.**

### **Abstract**

Student voice in higher education has the potential to empower students to influence change and improve the collective learning and teaching experience, working to counter a marketised sector. This paper presents findings from a research study that sought to conceptualise and discursively construct the student-university relationship within a UK higher education institute that promotes the involvement of students in the institution's governance models and policies. Qualitative data was generated from interactions at the multiple levels through individual and group interviews, observations, texts and policy documentation. The research used a Foucauldian critical discourse analysis to explore the concepts of discipline, surveillance and governmentality to help expose the problematic practices and the external power in operation. The findings provide a rich and detailed assessment of how students are positioned within the student-university relationship and the reasons for such positioning, developing a greater understanding of the complexities in practice.

### **Introduction**

Student voice in higher education has the potential to empower students to influence change and improve the collective teaching and learning experience; working to counter the use of student voice as a mechanism to satisfy a marketised sector. To achieve this goal requires a shift in practices, challenging the traditional modes of working that define the student-university relationship and underpin the power dynamics at play within an institution.

Conceptualising how student voice is integrated within the student-university relationship and governance models stems from the position that students should be provided with the space and opportunity to be heard, be empowered to influence change and have equal roles as partners with staff in the development and enhancement of the student experience. This framing and current thinking is suggestive of a democratic relationship between students and the institution, which is an intriguing prospect that has captured the interests of academic

developers (Curran and Millard, 2016) and educational researchers (Bovill and Felton, 2016) and is the focus of scrutiny and research interest within academic communities (Klemenčič, 2014; Bovill et al., 2015). In particular, it raises debate and dialogue about how students, students' unions, staff and senior managers can work collectively to form the student-university relationship and the impact this can have on learning environments.

This paper presents findings from a research study that sought to conceptualise and discursively construct the student-university relationship within a UK higher education institute that promotes the involvement of students in the institution's governance models and policies.

### **Methodology**

The research's method of enquiry was qualitative, using a blended design of critical theory and post-structuralism within an ethnographic case study. An ethnographic approach was used to conceptualise the student-university relationship in a post-92 higher education institute in the UK, by examining the firsthand interaction with the cultural sharing group of student, academics, senior management and administrators (Gallant, 2008).

Qualitative data was generated from interactions at the multiple levels of the institute: course or programme level; faculty or college level; and institutional level and was obtained through semi-structured individual / group interviews, non-participant unstructured observations, texts and policy documentation obtained during the data collection period and an informal participant journal. Individual and group interviews were semi-structured, relating to key themes drawn from the literature.

A Foucauldian critical discourse analysis was used to analyse the multiple forms of data, exploring the concepts of discipline, surveillance and governmentality to help expose the problematic practices and the external power that has developed the discourse narratives and practices in the university. Foucault (1980) identifies how discourses dominate how we define and organise both ourselves and our social world, whilst other alternative discourses are marginalised and subjugated. Through the identification of the discourses it has the potential to 'offer' sites where hegemonic practices can be contested, challenged and 'resisted'.

The research focused on the social contexts within why and how student voice is used in a UK-based institution and how this affects the practices and procedures. The researcher worked

with participants to construct the discursive reality of how the historical, political, economic and institutional influences have affected the way that students, staff and senior management are involved within the student-university relationship and how this proliferates through to working with students.

## **Findings**

The findings, in line with previous studies, highlighted how the amplification and importance of student voice through the metrics used by the regulatory bodies in higher education in the UK has become a key driver for many of the internal quality assurance procedures (Bergan, 2003; Little and Williams, 2010). The neoliberal discourses and principles of marketisation, performativity and consumerism have led to the introduction of bureaucratic systems that limit the possibilities of what staff and students can perform and achieve. The findings illustrate how the use of data has developed over the last decade and the emphasis on the use of data-driven dashboards are ever more prominent. The continual requirement to develop practice and benchmark performance across the university and sector are illustrative of pastoral power that regulates the behaviour and actions of institutions and staff (Foucault, 1982 ). Pastoral power works to gain the productive services of a 'flexible', 'agile' and 'autonomous' workforce who can regulate their behaviour and practice autonomously (Lemke, 2001; Ball, 2012).

For students in higher education the effects of pastoral power works to get students to navigate the market and select the programme as a product (Neary, 2016). The financial transaction and payment of money in exchange for a service creates a consumer entitlement culture (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Finney and Finney, 2010) and promotes a consumerist perspective whilst on the programme (Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017).

The partnership movement and amplification of student voice as an alternative model to try and increase student engagement and partnership is an attempt to resist the neoliberal discourses. However, the findings suggest that whilst the inclusion of students has undoubtedly increased their involvement in the assessment and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning, there is a danger that such models are used to influence the metrics (Gibbs, 2012). For the institution and senior management there is therefore, a tension between genuine desire to improve student satisfaction and improving the metrics.

If a neoliberal consumerist truth is adopted that seeks to utilise the student voice to improve aspects of learning and teaching, then the focus and structure of how this is achieved is developed around this aim. The consequences of pastoral power and how institutes function or what this means to be a student, an academic or a manager in higher education produces the consuming subject which is readily reproduced in society due to the marketisation that higher education institutions are beholden to (Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2016).

In summary, the findings expose the tensions between a marketised higher education sector and approaches that attempt to amplify the student voice and work in partnership with students. The possibilities of partnership are therefore severely limited under the modern-day construction of a higher education institute and its role in society and require consideration to enable further development.

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